

Transcript of smallholder opium poppy farmer's voice from Southern Shan State, Myanmar

My name is Nang Khin Oo, a smallholder opium poppy farmer from Shan State of Myanmar. I am also member of "Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum". My village is situated in a remote mountainous area, with poor road access and almost without any public services such as health, education, communication and development supports. In our village, we grow opium poppy for generations as a coping strategy to off-set food shortage problem and generate income to buy daily necessities, cover the costs of health care, social rituals and religious donations, and sending our children to school.

The elevation of our village is 1,700 meters with extreme weather almost no food crop can survive, and there is limited options to grow other cash crops due to poor infrastructures, access to credit, access to market and agriculture techniques. Moreover, we are in armed conflict zone. Fighting between Myanmar government troops and ethnic armed groups often broke out near our village, and we have to flee so often losing our properties, crops, and domestic and farm animals.

Under such misery context, opium poppy has many advantage as a cash crop for smallholder farmers in armed conflict zones. It's a short-term crop, not depleting the soil of its nutrients as rapidly as rice, wheat or vegetables. Opium yields a higher income than other crops, its small payload is easily transportable over jungle trails, and is not subject to bruising or rotting. It grows well on the poor soil of high mountainous area, requiring only a modest level of technology, and the poppy itself contains alkaloids that are of medicinal value that indigenous people traditionally use to cure many illness and diseases.

However, our survival as a human being is at risk due to the repressive drug control policy of Myanmar government. Our opium poppy fields have been destroyed without any compensation. The forced eradication make our life from bad to worst. We lost our primary income source that consequence acute food shortage, school drop-out, reduce of traditional rituals and religious donation. Many families have to sold out their farming assets and send their children to Thailand to earn working as un-skilled wage labours. We also have to excessively extract non-timber forest products fetching for income to buy foods. Forced eradication violates our fundamental rights of indigenous people to livelihoods.

As conclusion, my recommendations on drug control policy are:

- No plant is drug, opium poppy farmers should not be criminalized;
- Eradication should come only after viable alternative livelihoods is in place;
- Eradication should not be the precondition of receiving development supports;
- Farmers should have meaningful participation in the whole process of project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluated the impact of the development projects;
- Legalize cultivation for pharmaceutical industry should not be excluded as an alternative option;
- Recreational, Cultural use and traditional medicine value of opium should be recognized;
- "Without us, nothing about us", opium poppy farmers should have the rights to involve in the drug control policy reform process.

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